

TO THE LADY #10

I didn't get my period until I was thirteen.
My mother told me I had lost my gold ring.
I asked what that meant and she said
"you'll know in time, you'll know."

The Heart As Diamond Ring.
Solitaire.

My mother's diamond ring was an imitation sapphire.
I thought it was pretty & didn't understand why
she called it costume jewelry & didn't wear it.
Although the phrase had a theatrical ring to it.

Walking the Boardwalk
in Atlantic City

my mother wd. often
point out "Kept Women"
they who wore
on their shining, well-manicured hands
the largest diamond solitaire engagement
rings.

Kept Women, she'd sputter.
Her own hand sporting a plain
gold (14K) band.

Once in front of the Traymore Hotel (which allowed
Jews) we met Lucille Ball and I looked with wonder
at her bare hands.

Sometimes we rode in rattan carriage pushed
by a black man. There were many such
carriages being pushed by black men
along the Boardwalk.
I hated it.
Wanted no part of that indignity.
Knew nothing of the world.
Thought it was demeaning.

Years later my mother died in her apartment
of lung cancer which had metastasized
and her faithful black servant wept & moaned
saying she'd been like her own mother/her own mother
who had died in childbirth with number eleven child,
herself.

I heard this from behind me as I bent over my mother
holding her hand, kissing her hot forehead with a damp
cool cloth, telling her Mother you are dying and I am
with you,
Mother thank you for being my mother, trying to guide
her last thoughts not to heaven

but to the clear light
of her own natural beauty, thanking her again & again.

And I did not apologize for living
as a Kept Woman
who wears the huge indestructable diamond of poetry
in place of the bouquet of sweetheart roses
my heart might have been
had I not surrendered
to vulnerability.

And I knew I talked only to myself.
My mother rode in some jitney, practically
under the ocean, pushed by a faithful
servant
going toward some safe hotel of the senses.

When she had drowned I noticed
my father had removed
that plain gold (14K) band
but had forgotten to instruct the practical
nurse he'd hired
to trim her fingernails which were monstrously long
& sharp.

This poem is for all women who speak
kabbalistic language to themselves & to their
daughters : may you learn to shout,
weep,moan,sing & celebrate
the truth / we are Kept Women

only if we choose to be. The real
issue is not poetry : it is human

Survival.

-- Barbara Moraff

Strafford VT

TWO OF A KIND

Tennessee Williams invited Carson McCullers
To his house once
To work on a dramatization.

They worked at opposite ends of a long table
Passing a bottle of whiskey
Back and forth between them.